Quarantine Fatigue: Why Some of Us Have Stopped Being Vigilant and How to Overcome It

June 23, 2020

If you've found you're no longer disinfecting your hands as often or becoming more lenient toward unnecessary trips outside, you're not alone.

This unintentional phenomenon is "caution fatigue" — and you have your brain to blame.

You were likely vigilant at the pandemic's outset, consistently keeping up with ways to ensure you didn't get infected with the coronavirus or infect others. The threat was new and urgent to your brain. And driven by the human instinct for self-preservation, fresh fear motivated you to eagerly adhere to recommended safety precautions.

Fast-forward three months, and that sense of immediacy may have faded. Caution fatigue "occurs when people show low motivation or energy to comply with safety guidelines," said Jacqueline Gollan, who holds two professorships at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine: one in psychiatry and behavioral sciences, and another in obstetrics and gynecology.

"It's reflected when we become impatient with warnings, or we don't believe the warnings to be real or relevant, or we de-emphasize the actual risk," she added. "And in doing that, we then bend rules or stop safety behaviors like washing hands, wearing masks and social distancing."

Caution fatigue has been observed in previous or everyday life situations, such as when you ignore an alarm of some sort and don't take it seriously because you've heard it before. This mental state happens for a few reasons, including chronic stress, decreased sensitivity to warnings and the inability to process new information with others.

You can combat quarantine fatigue with self-care, conversations with loved ones and shifting your mindset so following guidelines seems rewarding instead of dreadful.

Adapting to threats

Caution fatigue can result from a decreased sensitivity to repeated warnings, Gollan said.The amygdala, the region of the brain that registers fear, activates when we see or hear a threat (or information about the pandemic). When our brains perceive threats, fear is communicated throughout the body via stress hormones and the sympathetic nervous system, or our fight-or-flight response.

"So the amygdala is important because it determines the relative importance of the threat," Gollan said.

Now the brain's alarm system has gone off, so it has prepared the body to sort itself out and respond to questions like, "Do I get more groceries today?" or "Do I meet with those friends?" Enter the

hippocampus, which is connected to the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex. It helps the brain assess the context of a perceived threat and whether it's real, Gollan said.

"They basically assign the context of how wiping down the groceries initially was important, but now not so much," Gollan said. "And so they put the brakes on it … to sort of decrease the amygdala fear of reactivity.

"So the front part of the brain, the thinking part, says, 'Hey, emotions. It's OK. You don't have to do that right now,'" she added. "We use these processes basically to create a sense of control."

This perception of control as a way to manage threats can make you more confident about the things that once scared you, because you're now reassured that you're safe. Consider a horror movie, for example — seeing it the second or third time isn't nearly as scary as the first time you watched it.

"There's a way people may create a context that assumes that it's not important," Gollan said. "They don't see anybody sick around them. They don't know what's going on, so why would they pay attention to it? So they may assume a sense of confidence or a perception of control to … confront the situations that are actually risky."

Our brains adjust the perception of the alarms to reduce the stress, so then it takes longer to respond to the warning or we ignore it. You might disinfect some groceries but not all or just wash your hands occasionally.

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